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Is it possible that the CIA really is not the enemy?

The question near the end of the hostages' press conference at West Point on the Central Intelligence Agency seemed about as appropriate as a wailing mourner at a wedding. But the time has come to talk about the CIA openly and honestly, looking at its uses and limitations, and at the controls it needs under a constitutional government.

For starters, let us abandon the prevalent notion that the CIA is the enemy. Let us assume that the CIA is on our side. By "our side" we mean the United States and our interests in a world that contains the predatory Soviet Union and assorted subsidiary ill-wishers. We should have every expectation that the CIA operates in the interests of the United States.

But what constitutes America's interests is widely and fiercely debated. It is not always easy to agree on definitions. And there are examples of the misuse of the intelligence force by the Nixon White House (more attempted than accomplished) and accounts of questionable covert actions under Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy.

These are all legitimate concerns. But the CIA forever is in the position that its failures often become "public" knowledge, while successes must remain secret. In the last analysis, the CIA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the military forces are at the disposal of the president who chooses their leaders and issues the orders. They can be no better than the president. The way to be reasonably sure that these institutions of great power will have a

proper regard for individual rights and legal processes is to insist upon leaders who have such a regard.

But in addition to this, it is time to look at intelligence operations from a perspective of reality. It is not realistic to listen to those who assail U.S. aid to a centrist government in El Salvador but are unconcerned about Soviet threats to "preserve socialism" in Poland by any means necessary. It is time to stop arguing from crazy presumptions of U.S. guilt based on meaningless terms such as "imperialism" and "militarism" and "corporate elites."

This is the sort of dithering that equates Vietnam with the Holocaust; Nixon and LBJ with Hitler; U.S. policy in Iran with the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and the FBI and the CIA with the KGB and the Gestapo. It has been carried forward in recent years with an outpouring of speculative books on assassinations and movies that are disguised as semi-documentaries. It is mostly nonsense.

The overriding fact is that there are real totalitarians in the world who would like to destroy representative government and individual freedom, and the influence and power of the United States. Their propaganda line is sometimes echoed by silly people who love to prate of U.S. fascism and its instrument, the CIA. They would find out who the real fascists are soon enough if their totalitarian friends ever should attain power. They would be looking out at them from the wrong side of the barbed wire of an American gulag.